Marina the Monk

(5th Century)

BRIEFING

Marina, distinguished as Marina the Monk and also known as Marina the Syrian, Marinos, Pelagia (this being the Greek equivalent of 'Marina'; see Pelagia) and Mary of Alexandria (Coptic: ⲧⲁⲅⲓⲁ Ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲛⲁ ⲛ̀ⲁⲥⲕⲏⲧⲏⲥ), was a Christian saint from part of Asian Byzantium, generally said to be present-day Lebanon. Details of the saint's life vary.

Marina probably lived in the 5th century, and the first biographical account was probably written sometime between 525 and 650; it is preserved in several manuscripts, including one from the tenth century.

LEGEND

Marina (in some Western traditions, or Mary or Mariam in other manuscript traditions) was the child of wealthy Christian parents and was born in Al-Qalamoun, near Tripoli, in present-day Lebanon. Marina's mother died when they were very young, and so the child was raised as a devout Christian by her husband, Eugenius. As Marina approached marriageable age, Eugenius intended to find his child a husband and then retire to the Monastery of Qannoubine in the Kadisha Valley of Lebanon. Marina, upon learning of his plan, asked why he intended to save his own soul "and destroy mine." He responded, "What shall I do with you? You are a woman", and Marina answered that they would both live as monks together. Marina shaved her head, changed into men's clothes and took up the name Marinos. Eugenius, seeing his child's strong determination, gave all his possessions to the poor and travelled with Marinos to the Kadisha Valley to live in monastic community life, where they shared a cell. The other monks attributed Marinos' soft voice to long periods of prayer, or else believed their new brother was a male eunuch.

After ten years of prayer, fasting and worship together, Eugenius died. Now alone, Marinos became only more intently ascetic and continued to conceal her sex. One day, the abbot of the monastery sent four monks including Marinos to attend to some business for the monastery. As the journey was long, they were forced to spend the night at an inn. Also lodging there was a soldier of the eastern Roman front. Upon seeing the beauty of the inn keeper's daughter, who was working there, the soldier seduced her and defiled her virginity, instructing her to say, "that the young monk, Father Marinos, did that to me" should she conceive a child.

After some time, it was discovered that the inn keeper's daughter was pregnant and, as was agreed, she told her father that "it was the young monk, abba Marinos, who did that to me." On hearing the story, the innkeeper went furiously to the abbot of the monastery. The abbot calmed him and told him that he would see to the matter. He called for and severely reprimanded Marinos. Upon realising what was happening, Marinos fell to her knees and wept, (falsely) confessing to the sin and asking forgiveness, preferring to be seen as a man and a sinner than as an honourable woman. Enraged, the abbot told Marinos to leave the monastery, and she did so at once and remained outside the gates as a beggar for several years. When the inn keeper's daughter gave birth, he took the child and gave him to Marinos who raised the child. Marinos fed the child with sheep's milk, provided by the local shepherds, and remained caring for him outside the monastery for ten years. Finally the monks convinced the abbot to allow Marinos to return; he accepted but he also imposed heavy penalties upon Marinos, who was to perform hard labour in cooking, cleaning and carrying water in addition to regular monastic duties and caring for the child.

At the age of forty, Marinos became ill, and died three days later. The abbot ordered that Marinos' body be cleaned, clothes changed, and body transferred to the church for funeral prayers. While fulfilling these tasks, the monks discovered that Marinos was, in fact, born female. This made them very distressed. The monks informed the abbot, who came to Marinos' side and wept bitterly for the wrongs done. The abbot then called for the inn keeper and informed him that Marinos was a woman. The inn keeper went to where the body lay and also wept for the pain and suffering which he had unjustly brought upon Marinos. During the funeral prayers, one of the monks, who was blind in one eye, is said to have received full sight again after he touched the dead monk's body. It was also believed that God allowed a devil to torment the inn keeper's daughter and the soldier, and that this caused them to travel to where the saint was buried, where they confessed their iniquity in front of everyone and asked for forgiveness.

VENERATION

Marina is venerated in the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Today, Coptic Orthodox Christians say that Marina's body is kept at Saint Mary Church and has not decomposed. It is displayed to the public on Marina's feast day, on Mesra 15.

In 2022, Marina was officially added to the Episcopal Church liturgical calendar with a feast day on 17 June.

Marina the Monk is also honored among the Druze, among whom she is called "Al-Sitt Sha'wani'", the shrine of "Al-Sitt Sha'wani'" is located in the region of Amiq on the slopes of Mount Barouk (Jebel el-Barouk) to the east, overlooking the Bekaa Valley and offering views of the much higher Mount Hermon to the south.